

TRANSNATIONAL LITERATURE

Gerbrand Bakker, *June*. Translated from the Dutch by David Colmer (Scribe, 2015)

Dutch author Gerbrand Bakker illustrates the effect of tragedy and connected memories through a series of intersecting vignettes in his latest novel, *June*. Bakker begins with a summer's day in June 1969, detailing a visit from Queen Juliana in rural Holland and the resounding impact of this day on the Kaan family 40 years on. It's a tender portrayal of family, exposing the different ways in which people experience a shared history.

The novel traces a single day, each fragment narrated through a different perspective: the village baker, a cemetery caretaker, a woman on a train and each member of the Kaan family. Reading *June*, a sense of stillness permeates the novel. Bakker shows the quiet of rural landscape and country living. His writing focuses deeply on the details, like a crack in a glass window or the sensation of pressing your thumb in cuttlefish bone.

Each detailed image, however, brings a sense of foreboding as if because one tragedy is 40 years past, another is lurking. The detail and stillness of Bakker's writing is exemplified in its form. The vignettes work to create a complete image of a family's experience in one point in time, giving heed to the past. As such, there is no plot moving forward. The reader's knowledge of a family's history is continually extended and coloured as the Kaans move through one day.

The novel begins with Queen Juliana's visit to the Kaan family's village. Bakker touches on the nature of celebrity, the Queen thinking while sitting on a temporary lavatory, constructed just for her: 'I am sixty years old ... For more than twenty years I have been sitting in my official capacity on lavatories like this' (10). However, *June*'s main focus is the interesting within the ordinary: the after effects on a man who is given a brain injury in a motorcycle accident, an old mother hiding away from the world 'up on the straw' (108) and a young boy covering graves in cow shit because he 'wanted to see what would happen' (193).

June centres on the three Kaan boys, Bakker showing the moving on of one generation to the next. A resounding theme of the novel is characters' understanding and coming to terms with their parents' faults. The Kaan boys try to coax their mother out of hiding in the straw, something she does when she experiences hardship. She throws glass bottles but they still show her compassion: 'now she's throwing real bottles. Fortunately, we're not over there,' Klaas explains to his daughter (203). Their elderly father chops down three trees on a whim and Klaas shows nothing but concern; his heart 'misses a beat' (168). This theme is extended through the cemetery caretaker's relationship with her son, Toon. She is unable to accept him as a gay man who forges his own identity yet he accepts her neurosis in caring for her husband's grave. Bakker also extends his reach beyond family, showing the interconnected roles people have with each other within a small but dynamic village.

Bakker also carefully alludes to gender and sexuality in *June*. Rather than being blatant, he steps around queer identities and gendered roles, allowing the reader to reach their own interpretation. In *June*, Bakker repeatedly revisits Jan and Toon's sexual encounters, portraying the briefest of touches. He shows them holding hands, touching or having sex in single images rather than descriptive scenes.

Bakker also depicts a continuing theme of unfulfilled female desire. He portrays a cemetery caretaker's sexual fantasies (boldly including rape fantasies) and the discord between her vivacious sexual desire and her ability to assert her own sexuality. She cannot be intimate with the baker, a man she sees regularly. She can only lie in bed next to him. The closest she gets to asserting her desire is to dye her grey hair a stark shade of black and to remove her jacket on a hot summer's day.

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Similarly, Anna Kaan expresses her unfulfilled desire to be acknowledged by her husband: 'She was so desperate for him to look at her' (43).

In *June*, Gerbrand Bakker's voice and style is at its most refined. The novel is a subtle and moving portrayal from which a reader can gleam the ways in which we are all connected through our family and our shared past.

Katerina Bryant